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RECOLLECTIONS
AS A SOURCE OF HISTORY.

BY

EDWARD L. PIERCE.

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A PAPER READ BY

EDWARD L. PIERCE

BEFORE

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RECOLLECTIONS AS A SOURCE OF HISTORY.

THE memory is in a strict sense the basis of historical narrative. The historian draws his materials from records, newspapers, diaries, letters, and other written or oral accounts; and these at first or second hand come from the memory. The diarist, who writes out at evening the transactions of the day, puts in permanent form what he remembers to have seen and heard since morning. The general, who reports a battle a day or a week after it took place, relies on his own recollections and those of others. But the memory, without which there could be little knowledge of the past, is, even when only a short distance of time is covered, a most uncertain and treacherous faculty; and the historian must keep its limitations constantly in mind. He must not, indeed, overlook other things,—the honesty and fidelity of the narrator who claims to have been on the spot, the accuracy of his perceptions, and the advantage or disadvantage of his standpoint; but assuming these conditions to be satisfactory, he must still be critical, even sceptical, in the treatment of testimony; and his scepticism should be the more exacting the longer the period intervening between the transaction and the report.

This paper will deal not with testimony given shortly after the event, but with recollections coming out several years later,—ten, twenty, or fifty; necessarily coming, where the interval is long, from old people whose other faculties may be still fresh and active, but whose memory, failing them before a general decay has set in, makes their accounts worthless, at least in the decision of any question where controversy has arisen.

The honest man as he advances in years confesses his own weakness in this respect. John Adams, whose mood was reminiscent to the last, writing when nearly seventy-nine of the authorship of a Revolutionary pamphlet, said: "The Group has convinced me of the decay of my memory more than anything that has yet occurred"; and later in the same letter he breaks out pathetically, "Help! Oh, help my memory!"¹

One need not be as old as seventy-nine to distrust himself in this respect. If any one of us were to have all his letters written in youth and early manhood brought to him, he would find in them vivid pictures of some scenes which he had wholly forgotten and could not, even with the assistance of the written account, recall, and of other scenes which lay in his mind very differently from the way in which he described them at the time.

Retentiveness of memory in persons of equal intelligence varies greatly. Some retain only general impressions, while others retain a firm hold on details. When I used in the seventies to ask Mr. Longfellow about things occurring in the thirties and forties, he would often say, "You had better ask Hillard." The latter was remarkable for the freshness and accuracy of his recollections; and the same may be said of the late Judge Hoar.

One frailty which perplexes advancing years is the incapacity to distinguish between what one has seen and what one has only heard; and the result is that the two kinds of knowledge are hopelessly mixed together. The late Henry W. Paine, while still holding a foremost rank at the bar, used to describe a scene witnessed by him when Daniel Webster presented publicly to Charles Sumner, then a youth, a prize for an essay. Mr. Paine on reading Sumner's Memoir (vol. i. pp. 73, 74) discovered that he had fallen into an anachronism, as the presentation took place before he and Sumner met as students at the Harvard Law School. Happening to see his old comrade at the school, Wendell Phillips, enter the courtroom, he communicated to him his error, saying, "What a wretched thing, Wendell, the memory is!" The explanation is, that Mr. Paine had in early life heard the story, and, telling it often, had come to believe that he himself was present.

¹ Works, vol. x. pp. 99, 100.

Recollections may have a considerable value when they corroborate each other, as when they are given by different persons testifying without collusion or conference and generally agreeing in details. This test of evidence is familiar to lawyers.

Recollections may be of some use in coloring a narrative, where the substantial facts have been settled by trustworthy evidence; but even to this extent they are to be taken with extreme caution. I have had occasion to relate scenes, as a debate in Congress, which I had myself witnessed and described at the time; and long afterwards descriptions came out with incidents which I could not recall and which were not verified by contemporary accounts. I have therefore been obliged to suggest that there might be exaggeration in such recollections.¹ Mr. Hay, one of the biographers of Lincoln, once told me that he and his associate rejected anecdotes and narratives not supported by contemporary records or reports.

This paper relates to periods which have been illustrated by abundant contemporary materials, and is altogether aside of the questions which were raised by Niebuhr's treatment of early Roman history. It deals only with periods where twilight has passed into clear day. Nor will any attempt be made to weigh and compare the different kinds of evidence competent to prove historical facts, whether original, secondary, hearsay, or traditionary. Without doubt the best kind is the testimony of intelligent and trustworthy eye-witnesses, promptly and faithfully transcribed on imperishable records; but with something less than this history must often be content in determining the general features of a transaction, or the share in it which belongs to particular individuals.

The view here given of the value of personal recollections invites attention to some instances where they have been shown to be without value, even after they had found credence with investigators.

In October, 1895, I listened at Cornell University to the opening lecture of a course, by Professor H. Morse Stephens, on the sources of the history of the French Revolution, among them diaries of eye-witnesses, *mémoires*, and public documents; and he assigned small value to memoirs written several years

¹ Sumner Memoir, vol. iii. pp. 607 note, 610 note.

after the events, by persons who had been contemporary with them.¹

The "Boston Tea Party" took place December 16, 1773. The date and general features of the transaction are well ascertained: but no one of its members is known by satisfactory proofs. In order to identify them there should be some contemporaneous record, diary, or letter, or, at least, testimonies of responsible individuals, made independently of each other, substantially concurring, and given at least within fifteen or twenty years after the event. There were obvious reasons for reticence until the recognition of American Independence in 1783, but they ended with that date. When the contest with Great Britain had been successfully terminated, an avowal of connection with the destruction of the tea could entail no loss, and would insure honor, perhaps pensions, to the participants. Nevertheless, no one, so far as my researches have gone, confessed to any connection with it till about half a century after the affair, — when he had become so old as to be unable to distinguish between what he had seen and what he had only heard. The credibility of his narration would then be no more than that of the depositions of the Bunker Hill veterans hereinafter referred to.

There is no contemporaneous written evidence as to the participants in the "Tea Party." Peter Edes, writing February 18, 1836, of his father, Benjamin Edes, said: "It is a little surprising that the names of the Tea Party were never made public. My father, I believe, was the only person who had a list of them, and he always kept it locked up in his desk while living."² This statement, made in the way it is, does not justify the belief that such a list ever existed.

The number engaged in the "Tea Party" has been stated variously, ranging from seventeen to three hundred; and there have been discrepancies in the reminiscient statements as to the wharf where the ships lay and the number of the ships, though these points are now settled.

John Adams, who may have had some knowledge beforehand of what was to take place, wrote to Mr. Niles as late as

¹ Since this paper was read, Professor Stephens's article entitled "Recent Memoirs of the French Directory" has appeared in the "American Historical Review" for April, 1896, in which (pp. 475, 476, 489) he comments on the value of memoirs as historical evidence.

² Proceedings, vol. xii. p. 175.

May 10, 1819: "I now tell you, in truth and upon honor, that I know not and never knew the name of any one of them"; that is, of the participants in the "Tea Party." He avoided knowledge at the time, so as not to be a competent witness against any one in a criminal prosecution. Two years before the date of this letter a visitor "blurted out the name" of one member to Mr. Adams, but he would not commit it to writing. Curiously enough, he states in the same letter that he was at Plymouth at the time of the event, whereas his journal and his letter to James Warren, December 17, 1773, show him to have been then in Boston, — another instance of the untrustworthiness of old men's memories.¹

Not long after the date of Mr. Adams's letter to Niles, when an interval of nearly fifty years had passed, and the actors may be presumed to have reached an age between seventy-five and ninety, reporters and interviewers began to seek several garrulous persons who pretended to know about the "Tea Party." Family traditions came out of a father or son having tea found in his boots the morning after the affair. Niles's "Principles and Acts of the Revolution," pp. 485, 486, reprints from the "Boston Daily Advertiser" (date not given)² a report of conversations with the survivors of the period, who disagreed as to the number of the ships and the wharf where they lay. This interviewer says: "The contrivers of this measure and those who carried it into effect will never be known. . . . None of those persons who were confidently said to have been of the party (except some who were then minors or very young men) have ever admitted that they were so. The person who appeared to know more than any one I ever spoke with, refused to mention names. . . . There are very few alive now who helped to empty the chests of tea, and these few will probably be as prudent as those who have gone before them." This writer gives no names of persons taking part in the affair.

One of the interviewed persons ascribes to John Rowe the words spoken at the meeting at the Old South Church, "Who knows how tea will mingle with salt water?" — language used

¹ John Adams's Works, vol. ii. pp. 323, 334; vol. ix. p. 333.

² The original communication has, after a search, been discovered in the issue of that journal for November 10, 1821. The first of the writer's series was published October 30, 1821.

to instigate the populace to the act. These words attributed to Rowe have been cited on this authority alone by reputable authors. They are on their face incredible, for Rowe was an owner of one of the tea cargoes, and had enough of human nature in him not to exhort others to destroy his own property. And now just a year ago appeared his Diary, which makes it clear that he disapproved altogether the transaction, and could never have spoken the words which have again and again been put in his mouth.¹ The result is that the anonymous writer in the "Advertiser," who reports the loose talk of other anonymous people, is not deserving of credit.

In 1835, sixty-two years after the event, "The Traits of the Tea Party, being a Memoir of George R. T. Hewes," was published. The author withheld his name, but later he was ascertained to be Benjamin B. Thatcher. Hewes was ninety-three, or nearly that age, when his account was taken down; and he had believed himself to be in his one hundredth year. His testimony is impeached by his "positively affirming as of his own observation that Samuel Adams and John Hancock were both actively engaged in the process of destruction" (pages 192, 193); and he said further that he recognized Hancock, not only by his "ruffles," but by his "figure and gait," "features," and "voice," and that he "exchanged with him an Indian grunt." This was too much for even the credulous Thatcher, who remarks, "This is a curious reminiscence, but we believe it a mistake." Whatever Adams, or even Hancock, may have done in advising the destruction of the tea, no sane person believes that they took a personal part in the scene itself; and there was every reason why such well-known leaders of the Patriot cause should have kept away. Now, Hewes states Hancock's presence just as positively as he states his own; and his narrative can be relied on no more as to himself than as to others, as old men so often remember as seen what they have only heard. Thatcher appends to his memoir of Hewes a list of the "Tea Party," fifty-eight in all, — the first list ever printed, and indeed no name of any one connected with it had been before given to the public. He introduces the list with this explanation: "We subjoin here also a list which has been furnished by an aged Bostonian, well acquainted with the history of our sub-

¹ Proceedings, 2d series, vol. x. pp. 18, 19, 81, 82.

ject, of the persons generally supposed within his knowledge, on traditionary or other evidence, to have been more or less actively engaged in or present at the destruction of the Tea." This is in many points a curious statement. "Persons engaged in" are mixed with those who were merely "present at," whether approving or disapproving. The name of "the aged Bostonian" who knew so much is kept back without any apparent reason. It is a list of those "generally supposed" to have been participants or spectators, not of those known to have been of one or the other class. It is based on "traditionary and other evidence," the word "other" being presumably a weaker kind of evidence than even tradition, which is generally thought to be the weakest of all. And yet this list has been adopted by Lossing, who makes the number fifty-nine, and by Drake, who carries it to one hundred and thirteen; and upon this evidence alone descendants of persons so enumerated have chosen as a coat of arms a ship being emptied by Mohawks or a teapot fuming at the mouth.

Another "Tea Party" claimant is David Kinnison, the supposed last survivor, who died in 1852 at the age of one hundred and fifteen. His account seems to have been given in 1848, seventy-five years after the event, when he was one hundred and eleven years and nine months old.¹ Even F. S. Drake, whose list, given in his "Tea Leaves," is very receptive and inclusive (page lxxxii), admits that, "owing to the great age of Kinnison when this relation was made to Mr. Lossing, it is possibly in some particulars erroneous, and is given only as a piece of original evidence, and simply for what it is worth." This form of expression "for what it is worth" means in plainer English that it is not worth anything. It does not add to the value of Kinnison's account that in middle life he met with a severe injury, — the fracture of his skull and of his collar-bone and two of his ribs.

Drake (page lxxi) prints the account of Joshua Wyeth, who in 1827, fifty-four years after the event, made his narration at Cincinnati. He was fifteen years of age in 1773, and claimed to have been one of twenty-eight or thirty engaged. It is not likely that the real projectors of the affair, who worked secretly and kept their secret well, would have invited a youth of fifteen to join with them.

¹ Lossing's Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution, vol. i. pp. 499, 500.

At this Society's commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the "Tea Party" in December, 1873, Richard Frothingham, a most careful and honest investigator, read a paper appropriate to the occasion, in which he said: "Several of the party have been identified, but the claims presented for others are doubtful"; but he assigned no names to either class. He said of Thatcher's list that it was "not trustworthy as to those who did the work."

At the same meeting of the Society Thomas C. Amory added two names to the list, those of Amos Lincoln and Colonel James Swan; but he gave no proofs except by saying that when a Harvard student he visited Colonel Swan in London, who "recounted the particulars of the destruction of the tea in which he assisted." As Mr. Amory graduated at Harvard College in 1830, Colonel Swan made the communication fifty-seven years after the "Tea Party"; and Mr. Amory first gave it to the public forty-three years after it had been made to him,—thus carried in two memories for one hundred years. These intervals are too long to admit the two narrations as bases of history.

The conclusion is that no one person has been identified with any certainty as a member of the historic "Tea Party," at least upon any evidence on which a plaintiff or a prosecutor could expect a verdict, or upon the lesser evidence, that of reasonable probability, with which historical writers must sometimes be content.

One inquiry comes naturally in this connection,—why it was that after the peace of 1783 the members of the "Tea Party" kept up their reticence concerning their own share in it,—a reticence which appears in John Adams's letter and in the account reprinted in Niles's book. Those who had borne a part in the civil and military history of the Revolution took pride in avowing what they had done for their country in those spheres. The men of the "Tea Party" were then safe from civil and criminal proceedings, and also from social censure, as most of the owners, the Hutchinsons and Clarkes, were *émigrés*. Was their studied silence due to the instinctive shrinking of civilized people to confess a share in any deed of violence, whatever defences it may have, which lacks the sanction of law, either the civil law or the law of war?

When the corner-stone of the Bunker Hill Monument was laid in 1825, fifty years after the battle, there were present one hundred and ninety survivors of the army of the Revolution, forty of whom had been, or claimed to have been, engaged in the conflict of June 17, 1775. One of the directors of the Monument Association, William Sullivan, assisted by other directors and by Judge Thatcher, wishing to preserve the details of the battle and to clear up disputed points, caused the depositions of the survivors to be taken. These or a transcript of them in three volumes were sent to this Society in 1842 by William Sullivan's brother Richard; and a committee consisting of Ticknor, Bancroft, and Ellis was appointed to report on the historical character and value of the manuscripts. This committee came to the conclusion that they should be sealed up and deposited in the Cabinet as curiosities. It is not clear what became of them. They were supposed to have been returned to the Sullivan family at their request, and to have been burned by them; but some of the originals have been since offered for sale at an auction-room in New York City.¹

A note by Dr. Ellis to the Proceedings of the Society for April, 1842 (page 231), says:—

“I took the books to my house in Charlestown and deliberately examined them. Their contents were most extraordinary; many of the testimonies extravagant, boastful, inconsistent, and utterly untrue; mixtures of old men's broken memories and fond imaginings with the love of the marvellous. Some of those who gave in affidavits about the battle could not have been in it, nor even in its neighborhood. They had got so used to telling the story for the wonderment of village listeners as grandfathers' tales, and as petted representatives of ‘the spirit of ’76,’ that they did not distinguish between what they had seen and done and what they had read, heard, or dreamed. The decision of the committee was that much of the contents of the volumes was wholly worthless for history, and some of it discreditable, as misleading and false.”

Such is the testimony of a very competent historical critic as to old soldiers' accounts of battles in which they served, or thought they had served, long ago. It fits well what King Henry foretold of the survivor of Agincourt:—

¹ Proceedings, vol. ii. pp. 224, 225, 230-232, 234, 235; Narrative and Critical History of America, vol. vi. p. 189.

“ Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day.”

In the Proceedings of this Society for February, 1881, pp. 340-344, there is an account of the Garrison mob of October 21, 1835, contributed forty-five years after the event by the late Ellis Ames, evidently without the assistance of any contemporaneous notes. He describes what he saw of the mob, and then mentions a call at the law office of A. H. Fiske, on Court Street, just after the affair, and then a call on Charles Sumner at No. 4 Court Street, directly opposite, to whom he related what he had just seen. Then apparently intending to give the impression that Mr. Sumner did not disapprove, or at any rate with any earnestness, what had occurred, he adds:—

“ He did not express such anxiety about the affair as Mr. Fiske did. If Mr. Sumner had gone to the door of his office, and walked by the railing on the left side about twenty-five feet, he would have come to a window which opened on the south side of Court Street, where by looking out in an easterly direction he could have seen all the doings of the mob which took place on State Street.”

How Mr. Sumner, whose office was in the rear, lighted only by an inside court, is to be held responsible for not looking at a scene on the street of which he knew nothing till it was all passed, it is impossible to see. Besides, the account which Mr. Ames gives and the suggestion he makes are altogether improbable. His statement of the interior arrangements of No. 4 Court Street, where he was only an occasional visitor, does not agree with the recollection of those who had offices there for a long time, among them our associates Mr. George S. Hale and Mr. George O. Shattuck, and who say that no window looked out from the hall on Court Street, but the windows looking out on that street were to be reached only by entering the front offices. Besides Mr. Sumner, who had inherited his father's anti-slavery sentiments, is on record as expressing like sentiments even earlier than the mob; and about the time it took place he became a subscriber for the “*Liberator*.”¹

I knew Mr. Ames from my youth, being born and living till manhood within four miles of his home. In the winter of 1852-53, I passed three months in his law office at Canton, often dining with him and driving with him to hunt up evi-

¹ Sumner Memoir, vol. i. pp. 24-27, 134, 157, 173, 185, 191; vol. iii. p. 69.

dence for trials, and to explore disputed boundaries in woods and swamps ; and at this time he presented me for admission to the bar. During this intimacy we talked of Mr. Sumner very often, but he never mentioned the incident about the mob. Late in his life he first mentioned it to me on the street in Boston ; but I paid little attention to what he said, treating it as a dream of age, as his faculties were then waning and his mood was unlike that of earlier days. He mentioned at the same interview another anti-slavery leader whom he saw active as one of the mob, but whose name he did not include in the account. I first ascertained that his narrative had passed into print when I saw it noted in the *Life of W. L. Garrison* (vol. ii. p. 25 note), where the biographers, though calling it "a singularly mixed account," interpreted it, so far as Mr. Sumner was concerned, in the same manner I had interpreted it. To my note of protest Mr. W. P. Garrison replied :—

"I had no personal knowledge of Mr. Ames, or I might have hesitated to cite him as I did ; but I detected his untrustworthiness in relating what took place about the Old State House ; for here I had a cloud of witnesses to check him at every point. I have referred in a note to his singularly confused accounts. At a distance from Boston I had to regard him with a certain respect, because the Massachusetts Historical Society admitted him to its 'Proceedings.' I think your quarrel is really with that Society."

Of all reminiscences those concerning public men at Washington are the most untrustworthy. The life of a capital city teems with gossip ; it abounds in rivalries, jealousies, calumnies. General Sherman in a letter to President Johnson calls Washington "the focus of intrigue, gossip, and slander." Stories of public characters have somewhat the interest of fiction, and the mass of readers care little whether they are true or not. Managers of magazines are keen in the search for them ; and the result is a medley of tales, with little of truth in them, and that little of truth so compounded with falsehood as to be worse than falsehood entire. They obtain a credence with even intelligent people, who fancy that what is in type must be true. In ten, twenty, or thirty years they are thought worthy of recognition as a source of history. But if any one canon should be rigidly observed by American historians, it is that Washington gossip is not history. I have had occasion

elsewhere to deal with some of these irresponsible raconteurs, as Miss Olive Seward, Adam Badeau, and Noah Brooks.¹ Not seldom such writers can be impeached by a record; and they are apt to expose themselves by falling into anachronisms. Now and then a valuable contribution, like that of General J. D. Cox in the "Atlantic Monthly" for August, 1895, appears; but generally reminiscences of Washington life and affairs should be dismissed without consideration by historians.

Mr. Lincoln has been the subject of a vast amount of reminiscences, and will continue to be such for the next twenty years or more. Whether the true Lincoln can ever be discovered among the rubbish is doubtful. At a dinner in Washington the host, whose recollections have been published, was relating at length what Lincoln had said to him and even more at length what he had said to Lincoln, when a guest, a witty lawyer of New York City, becoming weary with the monotonous tale, interrupted with the question, "Will you not now tell us of your talks with Washington and Columbus?"

Webster's memory has been the victim of reminiscences by one who understood him not half so well as Friday understood Robinson Crusoe. Mr. Lodge says of Peter Harvey's book: "A more untrustworthy book it would be impossible to imagine. There is not a statement in it which can be safely accepted, unless supported by other evidence. It puts its subject throughout in the most unpleasant light, and nothing has ever been written about Webster so well calculated to injure and belittle him as these feeble and distorted recollections of his loving and devoted Boswell. It is the reflection of a great man upon the mirror of a very small mind and weak memory."² And yet, as I happen to know, the book is not nearly so bad as it would have been without the revision by a most accomplished proof-reader of the University Press at Cambridge.

General Grant's "Personal Memoirs" reveal a remarkable inaccuracy of statement in an affair where Secretary

¹ Sumner Memoir, vol. iv. pp. 381-383, 329 note, 613-624; Century Magazine, March, 1895, pp. 792, 793.

² Lodge's Webster, vol. i. p. 95 note.

Stanton, with whom his relations were not pleasant, was concerned. President Lincoln visited Richmond immediately after its evacuation; and while there he issued an order to General Weitzel to give permission to the Legislature of Virginia, — or rather, as the order read, to the gentlemen who have acted as the Legislature of Virginia in support of the rebellion — to assemble at Richmond. He then returned to Washington by the Potomac, reaching there the last Sunday evening of his life. From Washington, April 12, 1865, two days before his death, he himself revoked the summons to the above body, giving his reasons. It was his own act, and his last important official act. The circumstances were well known at the time, and shortly after became the subject of considerable discussion.¹ Nevertheless, twenty years afterwards General Grant, in illustrating what he calls Stanton's "characteristic" as "a man who never questioned his own authority and who always did in war-time what he wanted to do," wrote that Stanton countermanded the above-named order, "notwithstanding the fact that the President was nearer the spot than he was," — meaning that Stanton did at Washington while Lincoln was in or near Richmond what in fact Lincoln himself did at Washington.² The publishers and editors of the recent edition of the "Personal Memoirs" have not seen fit to note this manifest error. This criticism is limited to General Grant's correctness as a narrator of civil affairs; but his accuracy as a narrator of military affairs has also been much questioned.³

American magazines have of late years teemed with descriptions of the campaigns and battles of the Civil War, contributed by officers who had taken part in them. I cannot speak in detail of this literature; but it is worthy of note that Colonel Robert N. Scott, who had charge of the published "Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies," took a certain satisfaction in calling the

¹ Nicolay and Hay's Lincoln, vol. x. pp. 222-228.

² Personal Memoirs, 1st ed. vol. ii. pp. 505, 506; 2d ed. vol. ii. pp. 355, 356.

³ "From Chattanooga to Petersburg," by W. F. Smith; "Grant *versus* the Record," by Carswell McClellan; Gen. J. D. Cox's review of the "Personal Memoirs" in the New York "Nation," February 25 and July 1, 1886; "The Mistakes of Grant," by W. S. Rosecrans, North American Review, December, 1885, pp. 580-599; "Misunderstandings: Halleck and Grant," by J. B. Fry, Magazine of American History, vol. xvi. p. 561.

attention of these magazine contributors to the disagreements between their official reports and what they now wrote after an interval of years. They had not even taken the pains to verify what they communicated for popular reading by recurring to what they had written at the time on official responsibility.

It happened to me to read Wilberforce's *Life* when I was in College ; and, Butler's *Analogy* being then one of my textbooks, I noted what Pitt had said to Wilberforce, — that "the work raised in his mind more doubts than it had answered" (vol. i. p. 95). I remember to have used this extract in my examination, and I have kept it in mind ever since. The biographers include this remark of Pitt among conversational memoranda which they had picked up from one source or another, and represent it to have been made in 1785, while Wilberforce's *Life* was published in 1838. But now, one hundred and eleven years after the remark is said to have been made, and fifty-eight years after it was put in print, Mr. Gladstone, in a recent paper in the "*Nineteenth Century*," November, 1895 (pp. 721, 722), disputes the authenticity of Pitt's reported remark, as being from a source "neither contemporary nor first hand," and "in conflict with another account of a directly opposite tenor," according to which Pitt commended the book. If Mr. Gladstone is right in his contention, what credit is to be given to the conversations with which biographies abound ?

Conversations are with difficulty recorded by a listener, and reports of them must be taken with much allowance. In ordinary talk there are many omissions to be filled by the context, — by what has been said before, either on the same or an earlier occasion. Then, too, expression and gesture are left to correct an imperfect sentence or complete an unfinished thought. Much depends also not only on the narrator's skill, but also on his abstinence from the natural disposition to color his record by his own feelings and ideas. The late Henry Wilson, just after reading a well-known diary containing much reported to have been said by public men, said to me that he would not talk with any one whom he knew to be keeping a diary. Perhaps he had premonitions of similar records concerning himself ; for his own conversations as to public men and events were singularly free and unguarded. The late

Nassau W. Senior often visited Paris, where he mingled freely with scholars and public men; and his notes of the "Conversations" he listened to have been published. I once mentioned these to Michel Chevalier; and he said that there was a good deal of Mr. Senior in them, — meaning that Mr. Senior in undertaking to report others had fallen into the habit of recording his own thoughts.

Somewhat kindred to the topic in hand is the credibility of diaries. These must often be taken at a discount. Assuming the veracity of the writer, he is apt not to confine himself to what he really knows. For instance, J. Q. Adams in his *Diary* (vol. xii. p. 274) attributes to Webster the authorship of Whig resolutions in September, 1846; but intrinsic as well as outside evidence points to another author, — J. Thomas Stevenson, a merchant of the time, who reported them to the convention. They lack terseness and vigor, — qualities which predominate in Webster's style.¹

But whatever may be the value of diaries, greater or less according to the moral and intellectual character of the diarist and his opportunities of observation, no credit should be given to anonymous diaries. Those which cannot be tested by the character of the diarist are worthless, and should never be cited except to be repudiated. No honest narrator will withhold his name from what he declares to the world he has seen or heard. A single instance must suffice. The "*North American Review*" in 1879 (vol. cxxix. pp. 125, 375, 484) printed what purported to be the "*Diary of a Public Man*," describing, with personal details of various public men, what was going on in New York City and Washington in the winter of 1860–1861, just before the outbreak of the Rebellion. The editor, A. T. Rice, refused to give the name of the writer to George T. Curtis, the biographer of President Buchanan.² Other persons have sought to learn the authorship of this "*Diary*," but without success; and perhaps, Mr. Rice having died, it is unknown to any living person. Several names have been suggested, but probably without reason. The latest theory is that the "*Diary*" is a pure invention, — a fictitious narrative by an adventurer re-

¹ *Memoir of Charles Sumner*, vol. iii. pp. 124 note, 125 note.

² *President Buchanan's Life*, vol. ii. pp. 391 note, 394, 395.

cently deceased, who had much to do with newspapers and magazines, who had a career both in this country and in England, and who late in his life figured in a scandalous trial in London. He was able, by a general knowledge of social occasions and of the presence of public men in the two cities, to give an air of probability to his narrative; but a close scrutiny reveals his untrustworthiness.

This diarist makes himself the most remarkable personage of modern times. His counsels and mediation were eagerly sought by men of adverse opinions and positions, and he was admitted by them to most confidential interviews. Among these were Douglas, Seward, Sumner, the British Minister, and the Confederate chiefs Orr and Forsyth. He was solicited to assist in making the Cabinet; all the departments were open to him; and Lincoln, as soon as he was in office, though weighted with unexampled burdens, put aside all other duties to receive him and listen to his wisdom. Who could be this marvellous man, so miscellaneous in his affiliations, whose thoughts statesmen yearned to hear in those dread hours? It is easier to suppose that he did not exist than to point him out among the characters of that eventful period.

The "Diary" bears in some entries intrinsic evidence of not being genuine. In the first place it attributes to Mr. Sumner activity in cabinet-making, — a function from which by taste and habit he kept aloof. In the next place it states that the diarist and another person held by appointment a conference with President Lincoln March 7, his third day in office, and in the afternoon of that day. Now it appears, by the public journals of March 8, that on the afternoon of the 7th the President gave a formal reception, his first one, to the diplomatic corps, — a protracted ceremonial. After its conclusion there would not have been time before dinner, which then came at an early hour in Washington, — that is, about six, — for such a conference as the diarist pretends to describe. Again, he substitutes blanks for names; and this eighteen years after the date, when the prominent actors, long since dead, could not be compromised by publicity. The suppression of names is an obvious mode of securing a fictitious narrative against detection.

In 1886, seven years after it appeared, I undertook to test the "Diary" as well as I could. I found only one person

living with whom its writer described an interview, — indeed, I think the only person named in that way who was living when the “Diary” appeared; and it is not unlikely, as that one had retired from active life, that the diarist thought him dead also. This was Hiram Barney,¹ who became, a few weeks after the reported interview with him, Collector of the Port of New York. I had become intimate with Mr. Barney as early as 1856, having formed an acquaintance with him still earlier. He lived till May 18th of last year. The Diary reports a conversation with him February 20, 1861, just after he had come from a breakfast at Moses H. Grinnell’s, given to Mr. Lincoln, who was then on his way to Washington. The breakfast did indeed take place, and is mentioned the next day in the “New York Tribune,” with the names of several of the guests; but Mr. Barney is not named in the list, and in fact did not attend, contrary to the statement of the “Diary.” In answer to my inquiry as to his presence and the conversation alleged to have taken place immediately after, he replied, October 5, 1886: —

“I recollect the article in the ‘N. A. Review’ to which you refer, — ‘Diary of a Public Man’; and as I could not recollect his interview with me to which he refers, was anxious at the time to know who he was. I applied to Appleton & Co., the publishers, but they could not or would not inform me. I do not think that his statement, so far as it regards my calling upon him at his hotel, or the breakfast at Grinnell’s, or Mr. Lincoln, had a particle of truth in it. There was no such breakfast, and no such interview, and no such statements, and probably the author was a romancer. If you should ever find out who the author was, I wish you would tell me.”

I replied promptly to Mr. Barney that there was a breakfast at Grinnell’s, repeating the names of guests mentioned in the “Tribune”; and he answered, October 7: —

“I have yours of the 6th. I am sure that I did not attend the breakfast at Grinnell’s Feb. 20, ’61. It was not such a gathering as at that time I would probably be invited to or would care to attend. There are some of my special friends in the list, such as Charles H. Marshall, H. Fish, and T. Tileston; there are others, such as John J. Astor, John A. Stevens, Aspinwall, and Minturn, with whom I was on friendly terms enough, but not very intimate; then there were others

¹ Diary, etc., pp. 137, 138.

with whom I was never on any terms of cordiality. It was, with few exceptions, a Seward crowd; and such people were wholly unsympathetic with me. I may have heard of the breakfast at the time, and it now seems probable that it really occurred; but it does not seem possible that I called on the writer in the 'N. A. Review,' whoever he was, and had with him any conversation, certainly not the conversation which he reports. I have tried to find out the writer, but *stat nominis umbra* in spite of all my efforts to uncover him. I do not even suspect who he may be."

It is not difficult to explain all this. The "romancer," as Mr. Barney calls him, knew from the public journals that there was a breakfast at Mr. Grinnell's; he imagined that Mr. Barney, as a friend of Lincoln and Chase, was likely to have been one of the guests; he supposed, in 1879, that Mr. Barney, who had passed out of sight, was no longer living to dispute his statement, and that it was therefore safe to put into his mouth any words he pleased. As the facts now appear, the "Diary of a Public Man" must be regarded as a fiction, — nothing more nor less.

The reading of Mr. Pierce's paper was followed by an informal discussion, in which Messrs. GEORGE S. HALE, JUSTIN WINSOR, WILLIAM EVERETT, BARRETT WENDELL, WILLIAM W. GOODWIN, SAMUEL A. GREEN, SAMUEL F. MCCLEARY, and ALBERT B. HART took part.

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